



WIDESPREAD FIRES

TOTAL DESTRUCTION

CRATER

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'Sinister yet pathetic': how the UK was primed for nuclear war

A new history of the government's cold war public information reveals a range of sometimes alarming, often ridiculous propaganda

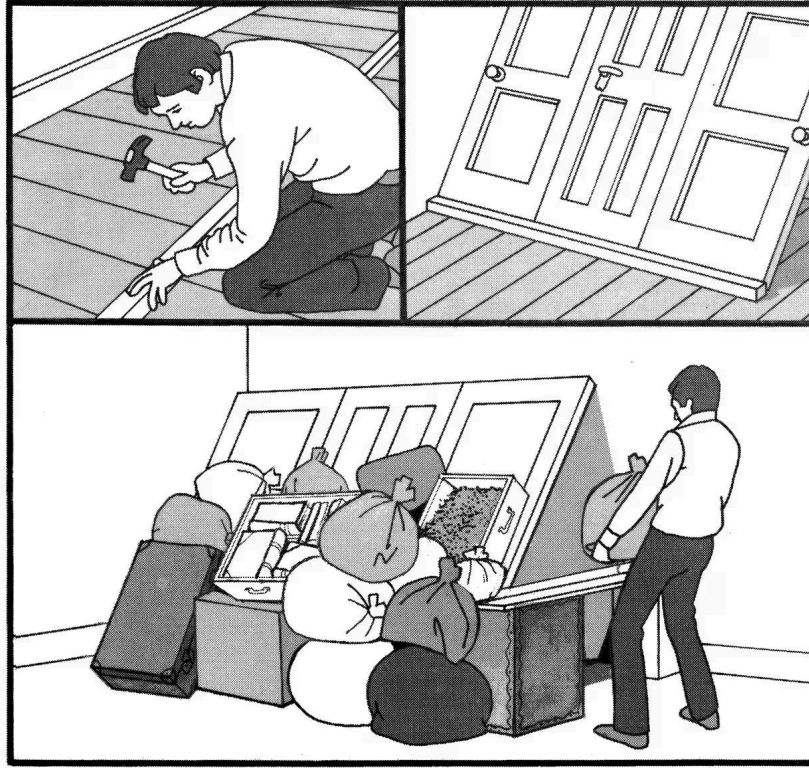
By [Sian Cain](#)

The impact of an atomic strike, from Today's Civil Defence (early 1960s.) Photograph: Four Corners Books

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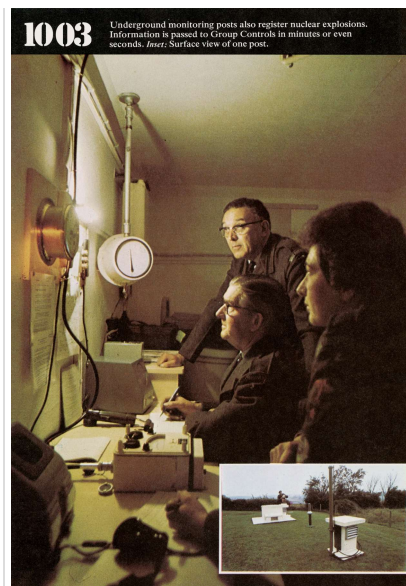
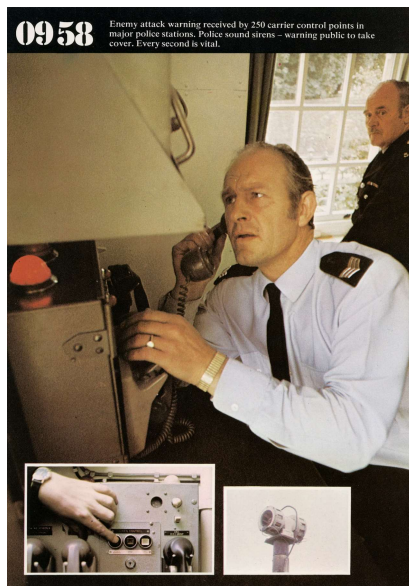
ven if you didn't buy a copy of *Protect and Survive* in 1980, you may still be familiar with the UK government's official guide to surviving nuclear war. The British public's reaction, when they learned that their government had

E been making preparations for a nuclear conflict for almost three decades, was both immediate and very British: they made fun of it.



'Make a "lean-to" with sloping doors taken from rooms above or strong boards rested against an inner wall,' suggested Protect and Survive.

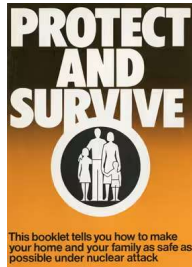
The 32-page booklet, which contained instructions for civilians on how to best prepare their homes - the contents for a good "survival kit", how to build a toilet from a chair and a bucket, and what to do with your loved ones when they died - was a unique combination of sinister and silly; societal collapse and radiation poisoning don't really suit the bland language of bureaucrats. Previously only distributed to journalists and emergency planners, it had remained a badly kept secret until 1980, when *The Times* ran a campaign challenging Britain's preparedness should the cold war turn hot. Finally, the government published it.



- The structure of the United Kingdom Warning and Monitoring Organisation (UKMO), and its role in warning the nation, are outlined in

this promotional booklet from 1974.

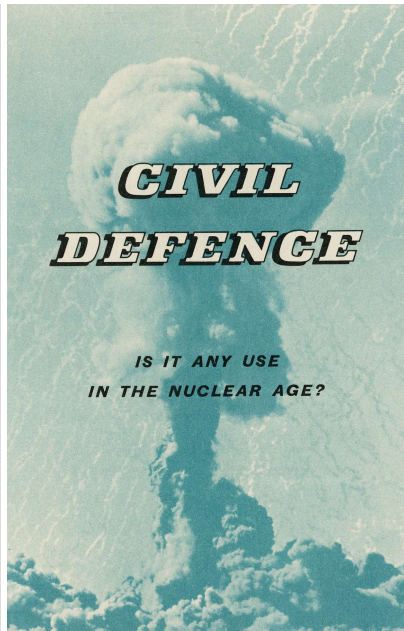
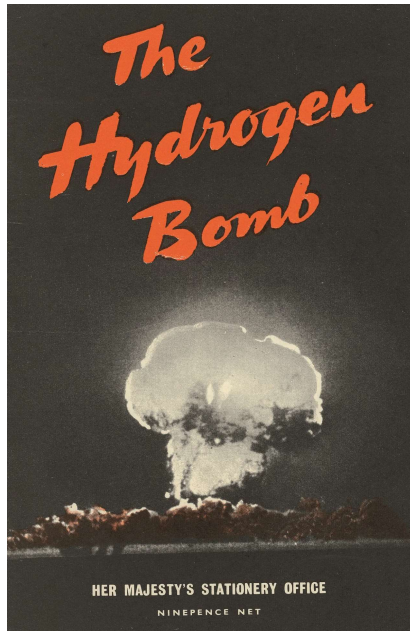
In a 1982 Young Ones episode, the hapless housemates hide under tables after finding a bomb in their kitchen, with Neil announcing: “I’m going to consult the incredibly helpful Protect and Survive manual!” Jethro Tull wrote a song about it. (“They said protect and you’ll survive / But our postman didn’t call.”) It spawned countless parodies by the peace movement and inspired similar guides in everything from the BBC’s Threads (under the title Advising the Householder) to the video game Fallout 2. One illustration from it, of a family glumly looking at their shelter, became the cover art for Radiohead’s single Karma Police.



But Protect and Survive was not the first guide produced by the UK government on surviving nuclear war. Taras Young, author of a new history titled Nuclear War in the UK, estimates he has collected 500 booklets, pamphlets and posters produced by national and local government, volunteers and businesses.

“Until you see them all in one place, it’s hard to appreciate the scale of how much of this stuff was being produced,” he says. “There was so much more going on than Protect and Survive.”

Despite describing them as “sinister yet pathetic”, Young, who works in marketing but is about to start a PhD on the guides, has loved them since discovering Atomic Warfare (1961) in his grandparents’ attic when he was 10 years old. “It hasn’t got a good cover, but finding that was quite exciting. They were essentially advertising campaigns. For me as a marketer, it’s like the ultimate form of marketing - can you convince people that they’re going to survive when they won’t?”



● The Hydrogen Bomb (1957).

The first pamphlet distributed to the public was Civil Defence and the Atom Bomb, published in 1952. In 1955, [the Strath report](#) - a government-commissioned investigation into how Britain would cope after a nuclear war - found that the country would be left on the brink of collapse with millions dead. This made the next pamphlet, 1957’s The Hydrogen Bomb, hugely popular.

The Effects of a One Megaton Groundburst Nuclear Bomb on Queen's Gardens in the City of Hull

TOTAL PROBABLE CASUALTIES
265,000 out of the City's population of 268,000 could be killed or injured.

BLAST DAMAGE

Black rings

Within 1.75 miles:
All buildings destroyed;
98% killed.

Within 2.5 miles:
Most buildings destroyed;
50% killed, 40% injured.

Within 4.5 miles:
Buildings severely damaged;
5% killed, 45% injured.

HEAT DAMAGE

Red circles

Within 5 miles:
3rd degree and fatal burns in the open. Most buildings on fire.
Possible fire-storm.

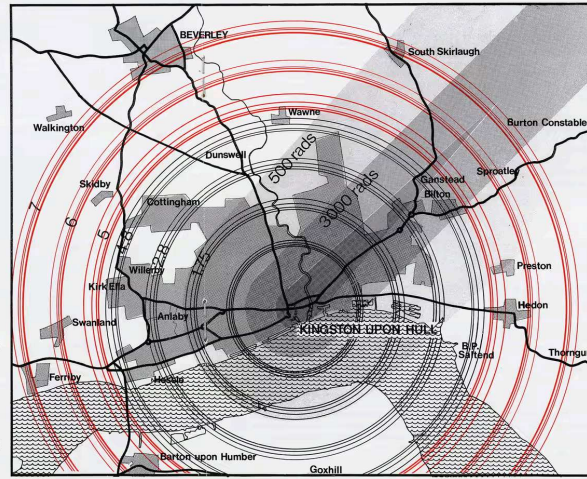
Within 6 miles:
2nd degree burns (bad blistering) in the open.

Within 7 miles:
1st degree burns in the open.

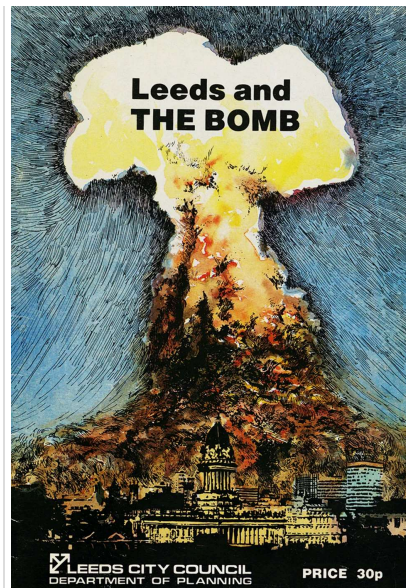
RADIO-ACTIVE FALL-OUT

Grey shaded areas.

Survivors of heat and blast would receive lethal doses of radiation within 2 days.



Bomb booklets from 1983-84



By 1963, Advising the Householder on Protection Against Nuclear Attack had a print run of 500,000 copies. Meanwhile, councils across the UK were producing localised guides that imagined nuclear war decimating their high streets, with everywhere from Hull to Bristol getting their own dedicated pamphlets.

There were so many that Young says there is now a steadily growing community of collectors in the UK. Some have personal connections to the country's preparatory efforts, like former volunteers of the Royal Observer Corps, a civilian volunteer force who crewed around 1,500 tiny, three-person bunkers across the UK, many on farming land. Some volunteers have even gone on to buy the bunkers they once served in and turned them into museums.



- The Home Office produced a set of training posters in 1958 which depicted typical British street scenes before and after a nuclear attack.

The dilemma for the government since the 1950s, Young says, was that they knew that their guides “weren’t necessarily particularly useful.”

“But at the same time, they had to be seen to be producing something, as they couldn’t just admit that we’d all die,” he says. “If they produce the stuff, people will criticise it as being useless. If they don’t produce it, then they’ll be criticised for not doing anything.”

Buildings: steel framed
and
load bearing wall construction



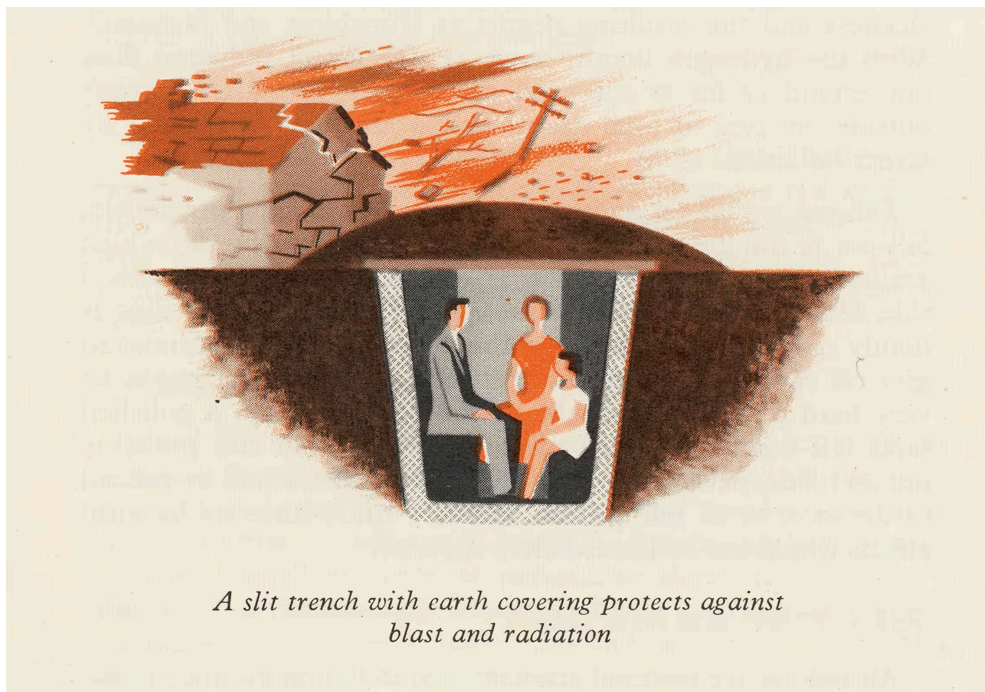
Typical view in centre of city

1

- The Home Office produced a set of training posters in 1958 that depicted typical British street scenes before and after a nuclear attack.

The pamphlets were less about imparting knowledge and more about preventing negative public responses such as riots, Young says. While researching his book, he found a note by one of the civil servants preparing *Protect and Survive*: “It said something like, ‘We must make people believe that they can survive.’ Not that they *could* survive, but they needed to *believe* they could - that kind of sums up the whole thing. And even if you did survive, then what? You’ve survived into hell on Earth. Is there any point in living with envy of the dead?”

After the humiliation of *Protect and Survive*, the government stopped distributing guides to the public, and quietly sent them only to emergency planners. In 1986, home secretary Douglas Hurd said: “If new material was issued now, everyone would throw it into the wastepaper basket or make fun of it as they did with *Protect and Survive*. I don’t think there’s a sensible purpose in it.”



*A slit trench with earth covering protects against
blast and radiation*

But the booklet spawned an unofficial spin-off: Protect and Survive Monthly, a magazine written by [proto-preppers](#) that ran 1981 to 1983. After a foreword in the first issue by Leon Brittan, the government distanced itself, with later issues reading more like conspiracy theory. “It became quite loopy and rightwing towards the end,” Young says. “The images are great, though – they mostly came from shelter companies who saw a chance to cash in.”



Hurd’s prediction, that any pamphlet after Protect and Survive would be mocked or thrown away, wasn’t necessarily incorrect. In 2004, a 22-page government booklet called Preparing for Emergencies was sent out in the UK, in the aftermath of 9/11, the 2001 foot-and-mouth outbreak and the 2004 Madrid train bombings.

“It was delivered to every household in the UK but no one seems to remember it. I think it went straight in the bin because it’s so bland,” Young says. “I think most people didn’t even read it. So the legacy of these cold war documents is quite interesting, because it’s just meant that the government no longer communicates with the public in that way any more. They are obviously trying to avoid any public reaction whatsoever.”

● Nuclear War in the UK by Taras Young is [published by Four Corners Books](#).

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